

# Of Tradition and Change

AIFACS award-winner Diwan Manna draws upon existing traditions to create anew, says Alka Pande in this profile of the Chandigarh-based photographer.



Diwan Manna

**B**orn in Bareta, Punjab, 39-year-old, Chandigarh-based photographer, Diwan Manna has come full circle. The winner of the Lalit Kala Akademi and two consecutive AIFACS (All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society) awards for 1995 and 1996, Diwan will be showing his latest series, *Waking the Dead* in New York in September this year.

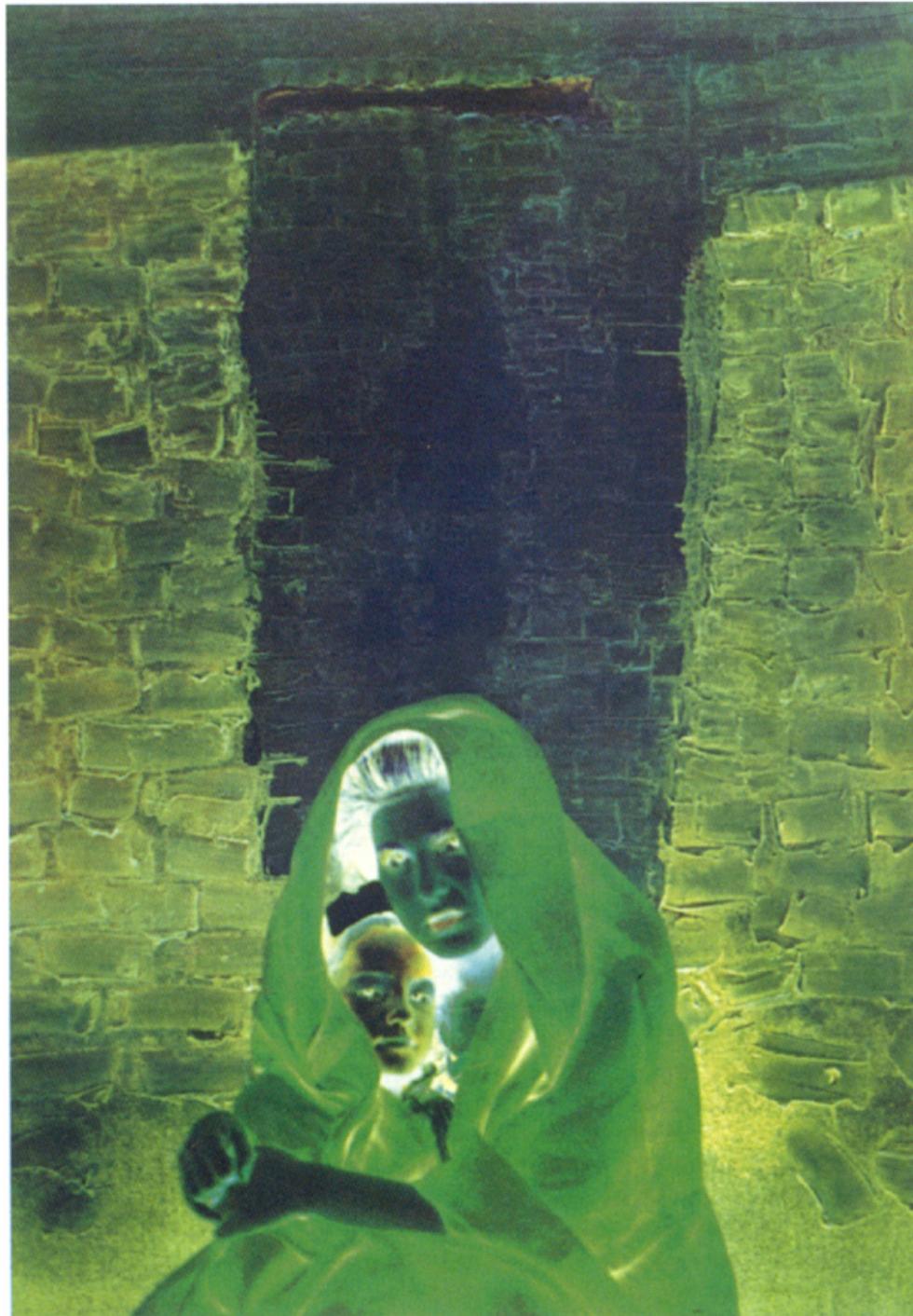
Living quietly in Chandigarh, Diwan uses the city to recharge his creative energies: The salubrious climate and the quiet spirit of the city provide an ideal backdrop for his reflective spirit.

Although initially inspired by Raghu Rai, Diwan's work does not draw from the renowned Indian photographer's approach. Diwan is not interested in doing journalistic, travel, coffee-table or documentary photography. He is, however, inspired by the work of American photographer Peter Joel Witkins.

Until the age of 17, Diwan was literally a small town boy. A regular actor at the annual Ramlila shows and an integral part of the village theatre group. "I was always the hero, either I was Ram in the Ramlila or Bhakt Prahlad in the village productions," says Diwan with pride.

After his matriculation he joined the Government College of Art. His inclination towards art was evident in his poetry writing and paintings. At the College of Art he pursued his

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From the Violence series

involvement with theatre further and took part in street theatre and workshops conducted by Badal Sircar. He even acted in a film by Imtiaz Khan and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, based on G.S. Channi's play called *Disturbed Area*. All these experiences are reflected in his work which involves developing a concept, directing it and photographing it.

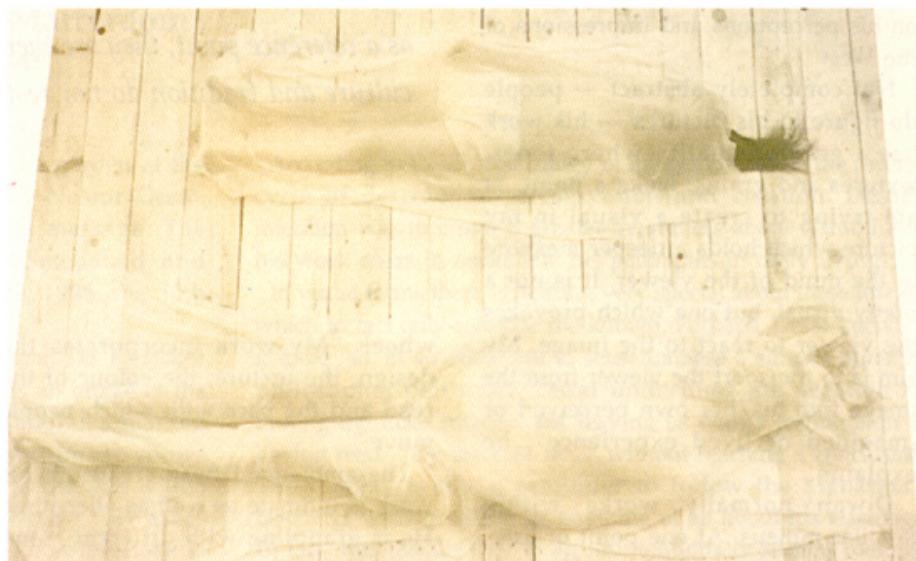
Over the years, Diwan's eye has grown increasingly mature, viewing reality from a different perspective. Years of constant practice, of working and re-working ideas, elements and methodologies, to represent them, and having seen a lot of meaningful work done by photographers in Europe and America, many notions of ways of approaching photography have been destroyed for him. At the same time some existing ones have been strengthened and reconfirmed.

Diwan has now acquired a lot of information about existing icons and symbols, and it is time for him to incorporate this knowledge in his work. His attempt is to try and find a form and symbol which is part of our culture, without being repetitive. "I create something new from the existing traditions. Though the symbols of tradition and culture are ingrained in me, I take them as a reference point...they are present in the background. At the same time culture and tradition do not restrict or negate me."

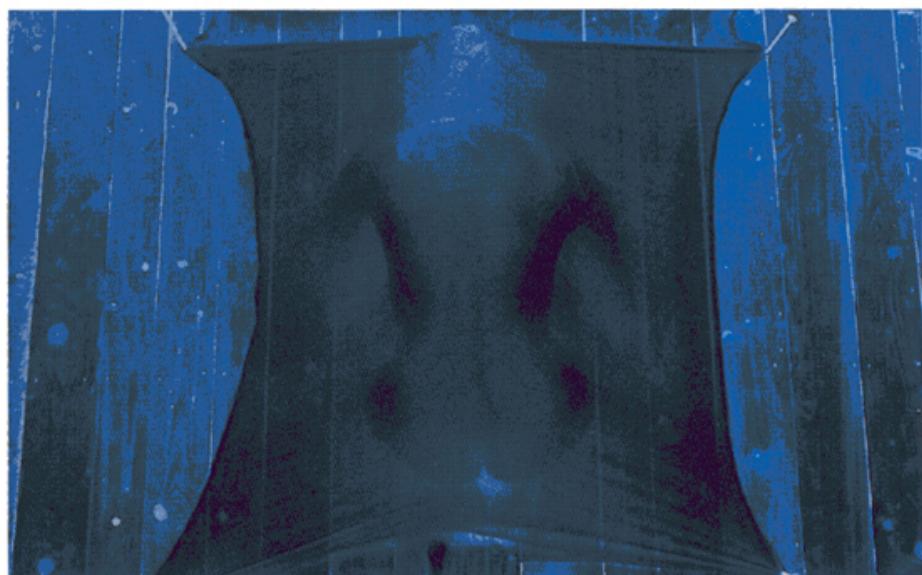
His first major body of work was done in 1981, while he was still a student. It was centred around alienation. He used the peons of his *alma mater* to express how estranged human beings — inspite of being together — could be within their own worlds.

The 80s were a period of great turmoil in Punjab and Diwan was obviously deeply affected. For the next decade, Diwan developed a technique of combining painting, acting and photography in a fusion of vibrant colours and emotions, producing eye-catching visuals which vividly reflected the theme of violence.

Diwan's award-winning portfolios are an indication of the direction in which contemporary art photography



*From the Waking the Dead series. 30 inches x 40 inches. 1997.*



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is moving. They are neither pretty pictures, nor are they portraits, neither picturesque landscapes nor slick tabletops nor stylised photographs of the world of fashion. His photographs deal with issues like alienation based on his perceptions and impressions of the West.

Not completely abstract — people do figure in his pictures — his work has a graphic quality where tones, textures and grains, make a point. "I am trying to create a visual in my picture which holds a deeper meaning in the mind of the viewer. It is not a pretty visual, but one which provokes the viewer to react to the image. My aim is to transport the viewer from the image into his/her own perceived or imagined or lived experience", he explains.

Diwan normally works within familiar milieus. At one point of time, it was *dhabas* and *rickshaws*. His next portfolio resulted from his trip to Europe. The pictures of men and women in a hurry. In their craze for speed their faces go hazy. They become their footsteps.

His latest work *Waking the Dead* comprises a series of pictures exploring the various facets of death. "When you first become aware of death it leaves an indelible impression on the mind. Fears related to death, the death of somebody whom you have known but never seen, or the ones you know and do not want to lose and, of course, your own impending death. Then there are fantasies about death. I incorporated the celebration of death, as I have seen some communities celebrating death. There is death which is natural, which is quiet, which just comes. Then there is death which is predetermined by those hungry for power. Death of this kind is violent, of unnatural causes, which becomes more painful for those who face it and for those who see it. The idea is to take the viewer to another realm of space where one is trying to understand death not only as a reality or a notion but as a concept," he says.

Currently Diwan is also working on a series of pictures focussing around men and women set in and around museum spaces in Europe and America, and the relationship between the feet, the road and the moving

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wheel. "My work incorporates the design, the texture, the colour of the road and the pace with which people move."

The ambience Diwan creates in his work is intimate as well as alienating. He is grappling with different elements which appear consciously and sometimes sub-consciously and is trying to reach an image expressing the emotions without being too direct. He is trying to be subtle without losing the impact.

Diwan has developed his own technique of printing from the transparency with a different combination of filters to achieve the desired effect. He has drawn from an international language whereby photographers use the camera to make their own individual statement.

What sets Diwan apart is his approach to work. He is one of the few photographers who survive mainly from the sale of his photographs. He uses his camera like an actor uses his body or voice, or a painter uses his materials. He works with 24, 28 and 20mm lenses for the black and white series and a normal 50mm lens for his conceptual work.

Diwan's work is representative of a concerned, aware, sensitive and committed artist. "The role of the artist is to envision the future of this world and try to find a way to communicate with the viewers that vision which he or she has envisaged," he believes. "Anything that happens or is made to happen always begins with an idea. The artist's role is to put forward an idea for the betterment of humanity." ■



*From the Violence series.  
Photos courtesy the artist.*